

The College at Brockport: State University of New York Digital Commons @Brockport

Campus School Documents

Campus School

2011

Our Incredible Experimental School

Steven L. Bennett

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/campus_docs

Repository Citation

Bennett, Steven L., "Our Incredible Experimental School" (2011). *Campus School Documents*. 3.
http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/campus_docs/3

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Campus School at Digital Commons @Brockport. It has been accepted for inclusion in Campus School Documents by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @Brockport. For more information, please contact kmyers@brockport.edu.

“Our Incredible Experimental School”

An Oral History of the Brockport Campus School

Steven L. Bennett



Table of Contents

Title page	1
Table of Contents	3
Acknowledgements & Dedication	5
Introduction	7
1. "That's Sweet with an I-N-G" Doris W. Sweeting	9
2. "We Were Kids That Grew Up Together" Gian Carlo Cervone Maria Cervone	11
3. "What I Will Be Doing in 22 Years" Fran (Thomas) Bielinski	19
4. "We Wanted a Better Education for Them" Gloria Read	21
5. "The Bus Ride" Carla (Read) Gavin Gloria Read	23
6. "I was Doomed to Become a Geologist" Kermit Mercer	27
7. Painting Ms. Van Slyke: An Afterward Helen Simpson	31
Appendix: The Special Olympics Doris W. Sweeting Helen Simpson	33

Acknowledgements

First and foremost I wish to thank Dr. Bruce Leslie for serving as my academic advisor on this project, and for being incredibly patient with the endless delays in its completion.

To Mary Jo Gigliotti, Archivist, these interviews were her idea in the first place and she steered an amazing cast of interviewees my way. Thanks Scotty.

To Jeanette D'Agostino Banker and Fran Moroney, the driving forces behind organizing the Campus School Reunion. Jeanette was my official point of contact and got me a pass to all the reunion events and luncheon, as well as materials that have aided me in the writing process.

To Dr. William Morris, via Studs Terkel, for unknowingly inspiring me to try my hand at oral history.

To Dr. Alison Parker, Chair of the History Department for approving this project as an independent research class.

To Dr. John Halstead, President of the College at Brockport, for hosting this reunion and generally fostering an environment that celebrates the long, strange, and interesting history of our school and local community.

To Charlie Cowling, Archivist, for advice and information on the Campus School.

To Kate Swartout Mitchell, "Our Incredible Experimental School" is a quote from her wonderful address to the crowd at the Campus School Reunion luncheon.

To my interviewees, Doris Sweeting was the perfect icebreaker when I was full of nerves at my first interview. Maria Cervone and Gian Carlo Cervone provided me with the longest interview of the day and Maria helped introduce me to the Read family. To Fran Bielinski, for having the courage to share her childhood writing with me. To Gloria Read, for broadening the scope and importance of the project in ways I never expected. To Carla Gavin, who expanded and gave context to her mothers interview, and who brought a unique prospective on the campus school. To Kermit Mercer, who shared his life story and thrilled me with stories of my favorite subject, the First World War. Sorry I almost made us late to lunch Kermit! To Helen Simpson who was a great storyteller even under the trying circumstances of noise and interruptions. She is a talented artist and provided a great closing story.

Dedication

I dedicate this project to the late George Rich. George was a great supporter of my work in local history, flooded me with questions at my first Brockport Scholars Day, chatted me up at Morgan-Manning House, and he and his wife Rosie shared a table with me at the Brockport Campus School Reunion luncheon. George passed on before I could complete these transcripts so this dedication is the only thanks I can give him for his good humor and many words of encouragement. I was blessed to have known him.

Introduction

The College at Brockport, State University of New York has existed in one form or another off and on since 1835. It has been a private school and a public one, Christian and secular, abandoned at one point and over capacity at another. In its early years it burnt to the ground once and went bankrupt twice. The name changes alone are enough to make one's head spin. It began as a single building; a four-story brick edifice located roughly where Hartwell Hall now stands. On the color-coded maps handed out to each disoriented freshman in the fall there are now buildings numbering up to #139, though I can count only 60 of any remote relevance to students. The map is even so kind as to indicate where future buildings now dreamt-of but as yet unconstructed shall someday stand.

The freshman will be gone in four years, but the buildings bear the history of the school on their frames. Those marked #1 and #51 are known today as Hartwell Hall and Cooper Hall. The future destiny of these buildings is polar opposite; Hartwell is the heart of the college while plans are in the works to dispose of Cooper. Depending on the age of interviewee, the alumni in this oral history refer to these buildings by the same name. To them it was the Campus School.

In 1867 Brockport was revived from its aforementioned bankruptcy and became a state school for the training of teachers. From that time until 1981 the Campus School also existed, though like its parent college it underwent several name changes. The college was known as the Brockport Normal School, Brockport State Teachers College, and SUNY Brockport. The Campus School was known as the Training School, the Campus School, and the Center for Innovation in Education.

It was with this background information in mind, and knowing little else, that I set out to record the oral history of the Brockport Campus School at the first Brockport Campus School Reunion on July 22nd and 23rd, 2011 at the College at Brockport, State University of New York. It was something of a fly-by-night operation. I had a pass to the events, a ticket to a luncheon, a packet of information compiled for the reunion, a new digital voice record I had just learned to use, a interview room with some refreshments, a pair of college archivists on the lookout for potential interviewees, and a building full people all old enough to be my parents who had, for the day at least, taken to calling themselves "the campus-school kids".

The results were serendipitous.

Creating new oral history is limited living memory, or memories transmitted to the living by those they knew in their lifetimes. As such this history does not cover the entire history of the Campus School. Kermit Mercer's memories bring us as far back as the years before and during the Second World War. The memories of his family and teachers take us back to the early 20th century. The majority of the interviews focus on the 1960s and 1970s. I suspect that this has to do with sample bias. Alumni of those years are now of the age that they have the time, money, and desire to travel and to participate in school reunions, and are still in the robust health to be able to do so. I think the eight-decade sweep of the stories here contained, from the turn of the century to the mid-seventies, is more than I could have possibly hoped for when first striking out on this adventure.

Who would have guessed a handful of interviews on grade school memories would bring out such diverse topics as Vietnam era student protests, the Special Olympics, gender politics, race relations, urban decay, or the state of science in Americas school systems? But should we really be that surprised? An overlooked fact of modern life is that the grade school system is the one almost unavoidable unifying experience of our culture. You can drop out of high school and college remains optional for all and unattainable by some. No one forces you to read, watch films or television, listen to music, follow the news or engage in the public discourse. But outside of a small number of home-schooled individuals we all spend our formative years in state mandated primary schools. Primary school education is thus both the primary means of American enculturation, and nearly as sure as death and taxes.

It should be no wonder to us than that the threads of all the great issues of 20th century America run through the primary school experience. No wonder at all that these memories remain so vivid of the institution that introduced countless pupils to reading, math, science, sport, drama, music, art, theater, and culture. The hand that rocks the cradle truly rules the world. Neither should we wonder about the fierce loyalty felt toward the Campus School identity. As a primogenitor of a modern cultural institution, the Campus School had nearly all the features that many parents and educators lament the loss of in today's schools: small class sizes, low student to teacher ratio, abundant art and music programs, a focus on reading, math, and science balanced by drama and the humanities, mutual respect between teacher and students, and an environment that promoted creativity and achievement from both.

All of these significant themes are touched on in the interviews that follow, though they may not be obvious to the casual reader who was not spent countless hours pouring over the original recordings in preparation of this transcript. If no narrative appears through the kaleidoscope lens as it turns, then I hope that at least the flashes of color entertain. For me these stories bring to life images I can picture just as vividly as they were described to me. The Brockport Campus School closed in 1981 but somewhere frozen in time a polished WWI helmet gleams on Dr. Drake's desk, Scott Read's shoe flies through the air, Doris Sweeting smiles sweetly at a contrite child waiting outside the principal's office, Ora Van Slyke waxes elegantly on the creation of the world, and the campus school kids are organizing yet another pick-up game in the playground. It's kickball of course, their favorite.

“That's Sweet with an I-N-G...”

Doris W. Sweeting was a secretary at the Brockport Campus School, and later secretary to three college presidents: Dr. Towers, Dr. Allen, and Dr. Brown. She reflects on her time at the school, the presidents, and her role during the Brockport sit-in. For her later comments on the Special Olympics, see Appendix.

Doris Sweeting: I started out in 1946 as secretary in the main office in Hartwell. We had an old switchboard, which you answered and then you could [manually] plug in certain professors or other offices. Then I worked for Dean Jackson, who was the Dean of Women for a half-day and a half-day for Dr. George Ansell, who was head of the Education Department. Then I took a couple of years off and when I came back I worked in the campus school office and I worked there for... I can't remember exactly, I think it was three or four years that I worked in the campus school office. And then I left because my young son was too much for my baby sitter. [laughs]

But I got a call one day from Dr. Donald Tower who was the President and he said “My secretary is out ill, could you fill in for her?” I said, “Yes... if I can be off at three o'clock each afternoon.” He said that would be fine. Well, his secretary decided she wasn't coming back so I ended up being his secretary until [1958]. Well he retired, Dr. Gordon Allen was Acting President, for a year [1964-1965] and I worked for him. Then Dr. Brown, Albert Brown, came. I worked for him until 1971.

Steven Bennett: *So you were secretary under three different presidents; do you want to talk about what each of them was like?*

Doris Sweeting: Dr. Tower was a wonderful person, as they all were. I used to get such a kick out of him. He loved to go down to the health center and talk to the secretary there, who was Belva Brown. She always had a joke for him. He would come back up the hall chuckling to himself and then tell me the joke. [laughs] He was so sweet and very good to me. I really loved working for him but he retired. Later on he called me and asked if I would do some typing for him, off office hours, and I said “Sure”. So I did, for about a year.

Then Dr. Allen took over for Dr. Tower and again he was a wonderful person. Of course I knew him from being the Vice President.

Then when Dr. Brown came things started to change. Not in a bad way. He had good ideas and had thought ahead on what should be. The campus started to expand. It had actually started under Dr. Tower but this was even more. I enjoyed working for him.

We had a sit-in. You have probably heard about that. That morning I parked in my usual spot out in back and went to come in and they had it blocked. They had the door blocked with kids. So I thought “Well I'll go around to the campus school and maybe I can get in that entrance.” Well the same thing. I said “Well I am sorry I have got to get in to the president's office. If I'm not there... you know...” So I just walked over people [laughs] all the way up the hall to my office. [laughs] It was quite a day.

Steven Bennett: *Were they polite about it or did they really try and block you?*

Doris Sweeting: They were polite about it. And I said, to them “You know you are going to want to have somebody talk to Dr. Brown and you know if I'm not there he's not going to let anybody in.” It was quite a day. I kept getting telephone calls from parents, some from Long Island and other areas, [asking] about, you know, was everything okay? I said “Yes, it's confusion [laughs] and everything...” But Dr. Brown handled it really well I thought. It's just one of those things. That was the era when things like that happened.

The following year I decided I would take a leave of absence. I was going to retire. Dr. Brown said, “Why don't you just take a leave of absence?” So I did for 6 months and I just decided I didn't need to go back.

Steven Bennett: *So you made your retirement permanent?*

Doris Sweeting: Yes. Yes, I did.

Steven Bennett: *How was your time working for the Presidents different from working in the Campus School Offices?*

Doris Sweeting: A lot more work. I loved the campus school because I also had students from the high school that came to get their office practice and had some really nice students do that. And Mr. Libarger was so easy to work for and I just kind of did what I wanted to do. All the teachers, Fran Moroney and all those ones, were great, just great. And the students. Students today are just entirely different in grade school and those kids were all so sweet. I can remember there was one boy who was always getting in trouble. I can't tell you his name but he would come in and he would sit in the front of the office until Mr. Libarger could see him. And he was kind of shaking you know [laughs] dear soul. It was great, great.

Steven Bennett: *What is your opinions of Brockport as the students know it now in 2011-2012?*

Doris Sweeting: I think it is wonderful, I do. I really do. Two years ago when I was here Jeanette Banker set up an interview with the President [John Halstead] for me because I kind of wanted to meet the new president. And he just welcomed me with open arms, I couldn't believe it, I could not believe it! I really enjoyed it. Then I had a tour of the campus and I just think it's wonderful. If it wasn't for this University College there wouldn't be a Brockport, [laughs] you know what I mean?

I retired in 1971. I live in North Carolina now. Shelby, North Carolina. It's about 50 miles west of Charlotte, 80 miles east of Ashford. I like the mountains myself, very much so.

“We Were Kids That Grew Up Together”

Gian Carlo Cervone and Maria Cervone are brother and sister. They are two of the four Cervone children who went to the Brockport Campus School. Their interview reveals much about the creative aspects of the education and also introduces the issue of the Urban-Suburban Transfer Program, which is covered in further depth in later interviews. Maria Cervone was a childhood friend of Carla Gavin and she introduced me to the Read family.

Steven Bennett: What was your time like at the campus school? Do you have any memories of any of your teachers? What was it like being with the college students?

Maria Cervone: I have a lot of memories. I had really good teachers. My first grade teacher was Ms. Luskey and she was just really, really good. We were there at the time that they were bringing in students from the city. They were integrating the classroom. There were a lot of children that came from the city. That was a really special experience. I think because I grew up with that I didn't know anything other than that. They were really wonderful people. The kids had really different personalities and Ms. Luskey was really good at getting everybody to work together. She was very good. [To Gian] Do you remember Ms. Luskey?

Gian Carlo Cervone: I never had her, but I remember who she was. Yeah.

Maria Cervone: And Mrs. Gilbert taught kindergarten

Gian Carlo Cervone: Yeah. Mrs. Gilbert was my kindergarten teacher and I was the oldest of our family so I was the first one to actually go to the school. I started out in kindergarten. Mrs. Gilbert was really good. She was just really good with kids. She is a friend with my mom to this day. My parents were very involved in what was going on. I mean I don't think there was really a P.T.A. but they had something equivalent. My parents were involved in it and a lot of the parents were. What Maria says about the kids from the inner city is true and that was a large part of our population at the school. What I remember about that... It was a real blessing to have that because we did grow up really not even knowing there was any kind of racial problem or anything like that. The children from the inner city probably knew more about it than we did. These were just my classmates and we were kids that grew up together through school. I don't remember any issues with racism, bigotry, or anything like that, whether it was religion or race or anything like that, in the students that we had when I was there. Those were just our classmates and we just grew up together. It wasn't until I left the campus school in 6th grade, it wasn't until I left there and went out into the world and suddenly all this sort of ugliness came into the picture that really had not been part of our world. It was a really good thing to me that it was that way. It was good for me personally to have grown up with those kids. And it was cool! You know at lunchtime we had our little forty-fives, you know, and it was the Jackson 5 and the Osmond brothers and we took turns playing them and listening to them. [laughs]

Maria Cervone: [laughs] It's true!

Gian Carlos: The one thing that I did remember, we lived on route 31 near Spencerport. It was pretty much country then. There was a field across the street from our house where a horse lived. I remember telling some of my friends from the city that this horse lived across the street from me, and they didn't believe me. I was sort of outraged. Not that they had not seen a horse or

anything but that they personally didn't believe me that this horse lived across the street from us. [laughs]

One time we had a field trip to the city for something. Maybe we were going to a museum or something like that.

Maria Carlos: Yeah. We had a lot of field trips.

Gian Carlo Cervone: Going down route 31, passed my house, and I'm like: [**Gian and Maria at the same time:**] See! There's the horse! [both laugh]

And then they all wanted to come over so they could go over and see the horse. That was the one thing that I remember about the real difference between the two environments, the city kids and us.

Maria Cervone: They came on buses. Talk about people to remember - Mrs. Canarosa. She was the assistant in the kindergarten class but she rode the bus into the city. She took care of the kids on the bus. At that time there wasn't the 531 Route. It was a long bus ride for them. It was maybe forty-five minutes from downtown Rochester to Brockport. [*Editors Note: This same trip can be done in 20 minutes using the highway system that exists in 2012.*] At the end of the school day the buses would come and all the regular kids from Brockport would go and then these two city buses would still be there. All those kids would be getting on and they had to wait until everyone was there. We were still there because my dad worked at the college and he would come pick us up, so we didn't go on the buses, we went by car. And so we were always there with those kids playing, waiting for everybody to get ready to go.

Gian Carlo Cervone: Ms. Canarosa had the fastest clap I ever heard anybody do. When she wanted to get your attention it was like this [*claps hands*] really fast and loud. I've never heard anybody clap that loud. She was a real character.

Maria Cervone: She could get everybody organized. It didn't matter how unruly they were. She would get their attention and get them doing what she wanted them to do, which was great. The classrooms, when we were there, it was at the time when they were doing a lot of innovation in education. In my classroom I wasn't sitting in rows of desks. We had what they called an open classroom.

Gian Carlo Cervone: Where there used to be more than one grade in the same classroom.

Maria Cervone: There was more than one grade in the same class. There were tables in the room that had benches attached. A long table with a long bench attached, sort of like a picnic table only it wasn't made out of picnic table material. The kids would be doing... everybody would be doing their own thing. We had different workbooks and textbooks to work in and everybody worked at their own pace. They had two or three grades in the same classroom but you might have a kid that was in an early grade who was more advanced in their schooling and they'd be interacting with the ones that were a little older than them that were at the same place they were in their schooling. You just worked at your own pace and that was really great. I didn't know that I was learning. I mean I was going to school everyday and I thought I was just having a ball.

Gian Carlo Cervone: *[incredulously]* Really? I knew I was learning!

Maria Cervone: I felt like I was just having fun. I said to my mom, when we got to the end and I had to go into the public school system, I said to her “You know I don’t know anything.”

She said, “Oh, yes you do, you know a lot.”

I said, “But I don’t know what I know. I’ve just been having fun.”

And she said, “You know.”

When I got into the regular school what I found was that what I had learned was how to learn, and that was a really important thing. It wasn’t like where I just learned facts. I learned how to be curious, how to figure out something that I didn’t know. That was a big part of the experience for me. I think it has been a foundation for everything that has come since then.

Steven Bennett: *Were you to ever in the same classroom together because of that arraignment?*

Gian Carlo Cervone: No.

Maria Cervone: I was not with Gian Carlo but I was with both of my other siblings. My brother David was a year ahead of me and I was in a class with him. I was in two classes with my sister who is two years younger than me.

Steven Bennett: *All four went to the campus school?*

Gian Carlo Cervone: Right.

Maria Cervone: We all went to the campus school at the same time, yeah.

Steven Bennett: *What were your feelings when you went to the public school after 6th grade?*

Gian Carlo Cervone: It was pretty hard to adjust to because at the campus school you could pretty much go at your own pace. I really like school. I liked learning stuff. I liked doing science. I liked reading. You could start out with a certain book and see where you were in reading. They’d bump you up as far as you needed to go to be at your level and then you’d just work from there. One of the cool things about it was that even though when we went there the school only went up to 6th grade it had used to go up to 9th grade. So the library had 9th grade books in it. You could go and get more interesting stuff if you wanted to do that, and I did. I like the fact that the library had that. Later on with science there were a lot of... It was kind of an open scene. I remember one time our science teacher said “Come up with a project and tell me what you are trying to learn with it.” I came up with this idea of a mold garden. I would collect these different foods from kids and bring them in. *[laughs]*

Maria Cervone: *[laughs]*

Steve Bennett: *I like where this story is going.*

Gian Carlo Cervone: It was in the fridge. He made a sign and he cut off this area for me and all my stuff was in there. We were seeing all different kinds of mold we would get. Different types of food would grow different types of mold. Stuff like that. To get back to your question: Going

to regular school, which to us was in Spencerport, was a very... very restricted... and kind of narrow and I would say a harsh environment.

Maria Cervone: Structure, structure...

Gian Carlo Cervone: I remember that somebody must have taken us in there to show us the school before we actually started. At that school there were two floors and the library was at the center. The library had two floors. You could go in there and I remember them saying "You can't go through the library to get upstairs or to get to class." I was like "Ok." Or whatever. What I liked was that it was a huge library compared to what we had here so I thought, "this is going to be great!" Very early, like the first week I was at school, I needed something and I left my classroom. I went to the library in the middle of what we would call a class period. We didn't have class periods here at the campus school. I went to the library and I was just about to go in and some teacher was patrolling the halls. They stopped me and said, "What are you doing?"

I said, "I'm going to the library, you fool!" [Gain and Maria: *laughs*] I didn't say that but I'm thinking, "What do you *think* I'm doing out here?" [*laughs*]

The teacher was like, "Well, where is your pass?" and I didn't even know what a pass was because we never had passes. It was a whole brand new concept that if you needed a book you couldn't go to the library without somebody's permission. It was just a whole different... It was like waking up and finding out you were in the army or something, but you didn't remember enlisting. Not that there is anything wrong with the army it's just that there was that kind of regimented kind of thing. That was kind of a difficult adjustment. I already mentioned the whole racial thing, which was a difficult adjustment. I don't know. It was weird. It was okay. It was just that suddenly was just that everyone has to do the same thing and it doesn't matter that you already know that stuff or not. By the time I was finished I was really kind of having some problems because of the fact that I just couldn't stand the way some of the stuff was being taught and what it was. It was just the fact that everything was so limited and restricted. But, I guess that's to be expected.

Steven Bennett: *Were there a lot of other campus school kids when you went to Spencerport?*

Gian Carlo Cervone: Oh, no, there were *none*! There were none.

Maria Cervone: No, we were the only ones.

Gian Carlo Cervone: Because most of the campus school kids went to Brockport because they were from here. When we started we lived in Brockport too but partway through we moved to Spencerport. Since my dad still taught here we just kept coming here.

Steven Bennett: *What did your dad teach?*

Gian Carlo Cervone: He was in music.

Maria Cervone: Tell him about "Cardboard Complex Compartments".

Gian Carlo Cervone: I wasn't really involved in that. Dave was more into that. One of the things that they did was, they had these big, probably four by four foot sheets of corrugated cardboard that we used to make stuff with all the time. We'd make the props or the background

scenes and stuff for the plays that we did. One or two of the classes made these sorts of things and they called them “Cardboard Complex Compartments”. It was a cross between a little fort and a apartment, or little flat.

Maria Cervone: They were study places.

Gian Carlo Cervone: They were stacked up above.

Maria Cervone: It took up the whole middle of the room.

Gian Carlo Cervone: Each guy would have his own compartment in there. He had his books or whatever and they decorated them. That wasn’t my class though. That was Dave’s class.

Maria Cervone: It was a very creative space. That’s why I wanted him to tell that. The kids got this idea that they were going to build this structure, which was going to be the places they were going to study. And they got to. They just took over the middle of the classroom with these big cardboard constructions. Then they got to use this as their study space.

Gian Carlo Cervone: Yeah, it was almost an inch thick that corrugated cardboard. It was actually very structurally sound.

Maria Cervone: It could hold the weight of a child.

Gian Carlo Cervone: I remember we used that stuff to build the Yellow Submarine once when we did one of our musicals.

Maria Cervone: We did Yellow Submarine.

Gian Carlo Cervone: It was the Beatles’ Yellow Submarine. We copied it right off the album. We made it the same way and painted it that way and it was big. It was really...

Maria Cervone: It was big. I remember being in the audience watching and they had cut outs and little kids faces waving out of them.

Gian Carlo Cervone: It took four or five guys to run it because we had people to do the periscopes up and down. There was a propeller that turned. We had guys with cutout wave shapes at either end moving that. It was pretty cool. We did a musical every year.

Maria Cervone: We had structured art, music, gym class, and shop.

Gian Carlo Cervone: I don’t even remember doing shop there.

Maria Cervone: I do. I remember going. It was the first time I ever took a piece of wood and sawed on the wood and made something. We had different things like that where your whole class would get time in that space. Again, once you were there you had a lot of latitude in what you did. I really enjoyed those. And library time. We had structured time in the library. I can remember, [to Gian Carlo] I don’t know if your classes did this, but one or two of my classes, we had what was called ‘contract cards’. We would take 5x8 index card and you would write on it what you were going to do that week. You would talk to your teacher and say, “This is what I want to do.” You might say, “I’m gonna go to the library and learn about the stars”. Learning about space, that was one of the things I was interested in. I would go to the library and I would

read. I would go to the section of the library that had the books about astronomy and I would go and I would read a little bit. That was right on my card that I was going to go to the library and do this.

Gian Carlo Cervone: We never had that. It's a good thing. I wouldn't have done it. I never liked that approach. My approach is that nothing is ever finished. You just start and you keep going. There are too many side trips to take.

Maria Cervone: I don't remember it being that. They called it a contract card but I don't remember at the end having to say I did all those things. I just remember the part about dreaming up what it was I was going to do that week.

I was telling earlier the story of... *[Maria relates how before the interview started she was telling a story to college archivist Mary Jo Gigliotti, and that on the basis of that conversation Mary-Jo suggested Maria talk to me for the Oral History project.]*

We were in Cooper Hall. It was called the Center for Innovation in Education. At the time that we were there that building was pretty brand new. I had been in existence a couple of years, maybe three or four years before we got there. It had been designed specifically as a teaching school. In the classrooms there is a mezzanine floor above. There is a one-way glass into the classrooms. Students from the college could be up there watching and observing. They could be learning how to be teachers. They could be watching what was going on in our classrooms. I didn't know this was going on. I had no idea that was the case. I was just in school.

Gian Carlo Cervone: It was pretty high up. We didn't really look up there if you didn't have to.

Maria Cervone: No. But come to find out, my mom told us much later that she was often up there watching what was going on in our classroom. This one day in particular I can remember my other brother standing up on the tables that were in the middle of the classroom. He stood up on the bench and then he stood up on the table. There were microphones that hung down in the middle of the room. He grabbed onto the microphone and he yelled into it "Hello up there!" So *he* knew. That's how I found out that there were people up there because I didn't know that. He was smart, he knew.

Gian Carlo Cervone: I don't know when I found out or how, but I didn't really care that much. They used to do all these experiments on us. I think it was students who probably had some project.

Maria Cervone: A lot of psychology experiments.

Gian Carlo Cervone: *[imitating an announcers voice:]* "We need a few volunteers to go with so-and-so." We'd go and they'd have some weird thing where there would be like cut outs of people and a little house with mom, dad, the dog, and the kids. They were probably studying kids ideas about gender roles and stuff like that. They would ask you "Who belongs in this room?" and you had to pick up the person and put it in. "Okay, in the kitchen... well no, not the dog..." After a while you got called in for these things so often we kind of got wise to the fact that they were just... you know. So we'd do stuff that we thought was weird and funny instead. We'd put the dog in the kitchen. *[laughs]* We probably skewed a lot of results because we knew what they were doing and weren't going along with it.

Maria Cervone: Messed up their studies. They gave us tests all the time. We would have a sheet of paper. We would do math figures. They were always doing that. It was just something you did. You didn't get grades at the end of the year. You'd give our parents written comments on how well we were doing. I was never afraid of a test because I was so used to 'get a piece of paper and do something'. It was sort of like a challenge. You would just do it. There were other things, like a room, not in the wing where our classrooms were but in a different part of the building, where there was the guy who did the hearing tests. I can remember going and you would go into this room and it was a sound proof room. There were all these switches and stuff. It was just a big fancy piece of equipment. You would go in and he would put these headphones on and they were like gigantic for the size of my head because I was such a little girl. Then he would do the hearing test and he would make sounds come from all different pitches, one from this ear and that ear. I can remember doing that really well. We had our hearing tested every year I think. I don't know if it was just to see if we were hearing well or why it was that at school this was done or if it was part of some other innovative thing they were doing. I remember that part really well and the library really well.

Gian Carlo Cervone: Ms. O'Toole.

Maria Cervone: Ms. O'Toole, she was wonderful. That was the librarian. She would read us stories. I remember when I was really young going and reading picture-book kind of stories. There were ones that I really loved. Then later on we would go the first ten or fifteen minutes out of the hour that we were at the library she would read us a little bit of a story. I remember her reading us "The Pushcart Wars" That is the one I remember the most. Every time we would go she would read a little bit more and by the end of the year we were through the book. Then we would have our own to go explore whatever we wanted to do. She was wonderful.

“What I Will Be Doing in 22 Years”

Fran Bielinski was *Fran Thomas* when she was a student at the campus school. I interviewed her moments after she received a letter written by her younger self. She shares her letter and other memories from the campus school.

Steven Bennett: *So, you wanted to talk about the time capsules?*

Fran Bielinski: Well yeah. We didn't know. We thought they were buried so we called and wanted to know where they were. Found out they were ruined. We were all disappointed. Then we found out that Mr. Rabozzi kept them in his home. He just distributed to everyone their time capsule letters.

Steven Bennett: *So this is the letter that you wrote?*

Fran Bielinski: “What I will be doing in 22 years.” This is from 6th grade. 1958. I think they tried to get him to bring them to a class reunion, 25th [anniversary] but he didn't. He is so worked up. Everyone he meets he remembers and he cries. It's cool, it really is, and I remember *everything* I wrote.

Steven Bennett: *Do you want to read your letter? Or is it embarrassing?*

Fran Bielinski: [laughs] No it isn't. I'll read it. It says:

Dear Mr. Rabozzi,

In about 22 years from now I might be getting out of college. I might be driving a convertible to Florida someplace. I might be married and have children and be living in Florida in 22 years. I might be working in a store in 22 years from now. I might be living with someone in this classroom also. I might marry someone in this room, for instance, Gary.

[smiles] Gary passed away about five years ago. But I remember everything. I do live in Florida. One thing did come true. [laughs] The whole class is very excited. They remember *vividly* doing this.

Steven Bennett: *And your class just got your letters back today?*

Fran Bielinski: He distributed them. He just gave them to us. Every 6th grade class he had, he had these. He just did our class.

Steven Bennett: *How many years were you at the Campus School for?*

Fran Bielinski: Pre-Kindergarten through 8th grade. Pre-Kindergarten, so we started with Ms. Rose right on through.

Steven Bennett: *Was Mr. Rabozzi one of your favorite teachers?*

Fran Bielinski: He was one of the greatest. He and his wife were great. We made candles in their kitchen. We poured wax into milk cartons and made candles in their kitchen. Mr. Nestle, he was the 7th grade teacher, used to play piano before class. That's how we learned our

Christmas carols. We went to school early just so we could all go down and sing, that was a good memory.

Steven Bennett: *Did you have musicals?*

Fran Bielinski: No, I don't remember that. Ms. Quick was our music teacher but I don't remember what we did too much. It was a great school it really was. We were a little lost when we went to high school. We didn't know anybody.

Steven Bennett: *Was it a hard transition?*

Fran Bielinski: Not really hard but we were more afraid just thinking about it.

Steven Bennett: *Did you go to Brockport High School?*

Fran Bielinski: Yes. We all graduated. This class graduated in 1964.

Steven Bennett: *Are there a lot of people here from the class of 1964?*

Fran Bielinski: Oh yes! It's amazing. I haven't seen any of them in a long time. I haven't been to a class reunion since 25 years ago. It's fun.

“We Wanted a Better Education for Them”

Gloria Read is the mother of Carla (Read) Gavin and Scott Read who were students at the Campus School, starting with Carla in kindergarten in 1969. The Read's are an African American family from the City of Rochester who took part in the urban-suburban transfer program that bused students from the city to surrounding school districts in the 1960s and '70s. Gloria Read reflects on her decision to send the children to Brockport campus school, the issues surrounding that decision, and her feelings about the education her children received.

Steven Bennett: *You lived in Rochester?*

Gloria Read: We lived in Rochester, NY and I wasn't satisfied with how the city schools were being run at the time. And so we enrolled, or applied, into the urban-suburban transfer program, which was part of the school district at that time. They had about nine different schools around the county Irondequoit, Penfield, Brighton, and Pittsford were some of the schools we could have applied to. So we had it open, it left it open as to where she could go so they enrolled her into the campus school [at Brockport]. At the time it was called the Center for Education and Innovation.

Steven Bennett: *She started from kindergarten?*

Gloria Read: She started from Kindergarten and went all the way. At the time it had high school as well, when we first enrolled her, but then later on about two years before she completed 6th grade they dropped the high school portion of the campus school. She did go on to the Brockport Middle School and then she went through the Brockport High School. So she completed all of her studies here in Brockport.

Steven Bennett: *Did you have any other children?*

Gloria Read: Yes. My son also went through the campus school program. His name is Scott Read. He is five years younger than her so he probably started in 1973 or so. Somewhere around 1973 or 1974 he came to the Brockport campus school as well.

Steven Bennett: *Did he also go on through the Brockport school system?*

Gloria Read: And he also went through the Brockport system. He also went to the middle school and the high school. He played football for the high school. And he played some of the other sports. He was a sports fanatic.

Steven Bennett: *What was it about the education in Rochester versus Brockport? Was it quality of school? What lead you to make the choice and how did you think of it?*

Gloria Read: Well, we wanted a better education for them. We knew that there were things that were broken in the city school districts so that when we had the opportunity to go into the urban-suburban transfer program... and they flourished. They made good and long term friends through the Brockport system. My son is still in contact with some of his friends. And my daughter still, I think, has contact with some of the friends she made through the campus school program and whole Brockport system.

Steven Bennett: *Where you satisfied with the type of education they received?*

Gloria Read: I have been very satisfied with the type of education that they got. I am sure that there wasn't any type of... oh what do I want to say... bad things that happened to them by going through the program. In fact, I think it gave them more of a worldwide view of life in general by going through the Brockport system. They didn't have any problems. I mean any kind of racial problems. There was none of that. Of course you are always going to have problems with kids, you know. One wants to outshine the other child or whatever, you know. You're going to have the normal children's problems. But there wasn't any [racial problems]. The administration was excellent. We would have parent-teacher conferences. I used to make sure I attended them because being so far away you wanted to make sure your children were being treated fairly. We also had parent-teacher meetings specifically for the parents and teachers. In fact the staff and the academic people were very good about coming to Rochester to hold meetings in Rochester as well as the ones in Brockport. We would have meetings at both places. [The teachers] met with the parents there. They were always willing to do that. I mean it wasn't like 'Oh, I have to go to Rochester to meet with parents' or whatever. And they would always come. There was never a time that they canceled and said 'Oh, we can't come'. They would always come at any of the scheduled times that we would have parent-teacher meetings. I was really very, very pleased with how the whole system worked for my children.

Steven Bennett: *How do you feel about the reunion today? Have you met with any of the teachers or any of the kids you knew? Or has your daughter?*

My daughter has met with some. One of the ladies had pictures and we brought pictures as well. I had some of their grade school pictures. I haven't met any of the teachers yet but hopefully we'll get a chance to meet some before the day is over.

“The Bus Ride”

Carla Gavin was Carla Read when she was a student at the Campus School from 1969-1977. She is the daughter of Gloria Read from the previous interview. Gloria Read is also present for this interview. Carla Gavin completes the story of the Urban-Suburban Transfer Program by relating what it was like to be a child from the inner city who the long bus ride out to Brockport to take part in the campus school experience.

Steven Bennett: *How did you feel about coming to school here? Do you have any memories of your classmates or teachers?*

Gloria Read: The bus ride.

Carla Gavin: Yeah, that was the first thing I was gonna say was the bus ride. I think we had like twenty minutes to a half an hour bus ride. Pretty much the friends that I made were the ones that I rode the school bus with. However, I did make some friends in the classroom as well. A few of them we remained friends all the way through to high school graduation.

Steven Bennett: *Do you remember when you were starting school? Did you think you would be going to school in your neighborhood or did your mom tell you that you were going to Brockport? Or was it just normal for you?*

Carla Gavin: It was normal for me.

Gloria Read: Yeah.

Carla Gavin: Yeah. There was no difference.

Steven Bennett: *Didn't even think about it?*

Carla Gavin: No, no, no.

Gloria Read: It was just riding the bus.

Steven Bennett: *Did you enjoy your thirty-minute bus ride everyday?*

Carla Gavin: Yeah. You know you got to finish your homework if you didn't. You got to sleep or you talked.

Steven Bennett: *Were you well behaved or rowdy on the bus?*

Carla Gavin: We were well behaved but I think in the later years we were a little rowdy. [laughs] I remember at one point we had to ride the city bus to come to the high school part at that time. We were loud and rowdy then. I don't think some of the college students appreciated that.

Steven Bennett: *You stayed in the Brockport school system all the way through high school?*

Carla Gavin: Right. I was at the campus school, then I went over to the middle school for 7th and 8th grade, then I graduated from Brockport High School.

Steven Bennett: *Was it a big change when you left the campus school and went into Brockport public school?*

Carla Gavin: No. I didn't see that there was any change. I had some of the same friends who moved over there as well. But there were a lot of students that went to the campus school with me that were on the bus but by the time we were in 4th grade a lot of them did not come back. It was just a handful of us that stayed.

Steven Bennett: *You were one of the few that stayed that went all the way through?*

Carla Gavin: Right. I don't know what happened though. They didn't stay in the program.

Steven Bennett: *Are you glad you went through the Brockport program?*

Carla Gavin: Oh, yeah. Definitely.

Steven Bennett: *You have good memories of it?*

Carla Gavin: Yeah. I used to work in the cafeteria, me and a couple of my friends did. We worked in there and helped out with the lunch trays and washing things. That was fun. I remember us having roller skating parties in the gym. We had a few of those. I remember the observation rooms upstairs. I remember running around up there a few times too. [laughs]

Steven Bennett: [laughs] *Oh, so you went up to the rooms upstairs?*

Carla Gavin: [still laughing] Oh yeah, we were up there before.

Gloria Read: I had forgotten all about the observation rooms until we saw them today.

Steven Bennett: *The students could watch you during your classes.*

Carla Gavin: Right, right.

Steven Bennett: *How did you get up there?*

Carla Gavin: There were stairwells to get up there.

Gloria Read: They weren't monitored then.

Carla Gavin: [shrugs] The doors were open! [laughs]

Gloria Read: [laughs] It was a little freer then, I think.

Carla Gavin: I remember the playgrounds. The one in the front that had the castle and the horses that were like swings but they were horses. In the back they had this, I'm not sure what it was originally called, but it was like a spinning wheel. I don't know if you'd call that a merry-go-round or not but it had the handles and it would just spin around and you would jump on. Someone got hurt so they took that away. That was a lot of fun. We always played kickball. That was the biggest event outside was kickball.

Steven Bennett: *Do you still live in the Rochester area?*

Carla Gavin: Actually we live in Spencerport. We're not in the actual village, but we are in Spencerport.

Steven Bennett: *What do you think about the campus now? Have you been able to take the tour? [Editors Note: As part of the reunion guided tours of the campus were going on throughout the day.]*

Carla Gavin: I did take a tour.

Steven Bennett: Did it look a lot different?

Carla Gavin: Not a whole lot. I was surprised. At the campus school the floors were the same. I remember where the library was and the art room. There was this hexagon like thing outside the art room and that is still there. I had my mom take a picture of that and the two areas that used to be the art room and the library. I wanted to go into the cafeteria but it was closed. I guess that is used for something right now. Banquets or something like that.

Steven Bennett: *Is that what they call the New York Room in Cooper Hall? [Editors Note: The building that served as the campus school during Carla Gavin's schooldays is now called Cooper Hall.]*

Carla Gavin: Maybe? I had plays in there and band concerts in there.

Steven Bennett: *Did you have musicals? Your friend was telling me about the musicals they had. [Note: See interview with Maria Cervone]*

Carla Gavin: Yeah. I was in the play Peter Pan. I thought we did a couple of small ones too. I think I was a frog or something...

Gloria Read: You were in something else too, I can't remember...

Carla Gavin: Another friend of mine in class had written a play and I was the crying daughter or something.

Gloria Read: You played an instrument too.

Carla Gavin: Oh yeah! I played the flute. There was a lady that taught music and she would teach us piano lessons. Mrs. McCrystal. I think that was her name. She taught a few of us piano lessons.

Steven Bennett: *Did you really like the art classes or the music classes?*

Carla Gavin: I always loved art. Art was fun. I mean music was cool too. I really liked learning to play the piano. But I've only come away with remembering how to play 'Mary had a Little Lamb'. *[laughs]* I can play that all the time. I'm trying to think what the other songs *[were]*... *[sings a few notes]* da da da da da... I can do that one.

Gloria Read: Heart and Soul.

Carla Gavin: Oh is that what it is?

Gloria Read: Yeah. “Heart and Soul”.

Carla Gavin: Those are the only two I can play. *[laughs]* That’s what stuck with me.

Steven Bennett: *It’s a start. Have you seen any of your teachers at the reunion?*

Carla Gavin: I haven’t seen any teachers yet. I did see a couple of classmates. I am hoping to see a few more. I know one of my classmates is a teacher in the Spencerport school district. I see him on occasion but the other ones I don’t see as much.

Steven Bennett: *You keep up with some of your friends at Brockport?*

Carla Gavin: Oh yeah. Yeah. I’ve been to a few of our [high school] reunions that we’ve had. There are still some campus school people that come to them.

Steven Bennett: *Do you have any other stories you want to share?*

Carla Gavin: One funny story is [about] my brother. We were in the back in the playground and we were playing kickball. He kicked the ball and his shoe landed on the roof. The people could never find his shoe. It was gone.

Gloria Read: I know. No one ever found that shoe.

Carla Gavin: They never found his sneaker. We had to go home without his sneaker.

Steven Bennett: *It could be on top of Cooper Hall right now?*

Gloria Read: They said that they looked but I don’t know.

Carla Gavin: They looked up there!

Gloria Read: We never found that sneaker. It was really weird.

Carla Gavin: I remember too there were some movies we would get from the library on the reels. They needed to be returned and sometimes they would let students take them back. Well I was going to take them back one day and I could not find the library. So I had to go back to the school. I was just so upset. I just didn’t know where it was. I couldn’t find it.

Steven Bennett: *[You mean] to the college library?*

Carla Gavin: Yeah, the college library. *[laughs]* So I had to go back. *[laughs]* Say, “I’m sorry, I don’t know where it is.” I think it was almost time for the bus to come. I took too long. I don’t know.

Gloria Read: Well those are good memories.

“I was Doomed to Become a Geologist”

Kermit Mercer was a student at the campus school, and much later a graduate of the college. His father, brother, and various other family members were also campus school alumni. He talks about his family connection to the community, the campus school during the WWII era, and how a Campus School teacher inspired, or doomed, him to become a scientist.

Steven Bennett: *Chronologically, your family had gone to the campus school...*

Kermit Mercer: Yeah.

Steven Bennett: *...and your father went to the campus school and the college?*

Kermit Mercer: No. He went to the campus school. His two brothers went to the campus school, I think. Chester. My two great aunts, his aunts from Chapel Street, went to the college here, and maybe the campus school. I haven't looked them up yet. But I do have pictures of them at their graduation in front of the old training school.

Steven Bennett: *Do you know what years they graduated?*

Kermit Mercer: I have their books actually. Someday I'm going to look into it.

Steven Bennett: *Do you know about when?*

Kermit Mercer: I would say it had to be about 1890s, something or other. Maybe even... somewhere between the late 1890s and 1910... for both of them...

Steven Bennett: *What about your father and your uncle?*

Kermit Mercer: My father became the Niagara Mohawk foreman here. My grandfather had a farm in Hamlin. They moved from Chapel Street. They got married and moved to Hamlin. He died down there. My father and his brothers came all the way up here to the campus school. They stayed with their grandparents on Chapel Street.

Steven Bennett: *You were in the campus school from kindergarten all the way through high school?*

Kermit Mercer: Yeah. I was born on Erie Street in the Henry Deal [?] house. I could walk straight across here to the campus school. I started in kindergarten at the old training school, the brown stone school. There was usually a maximum of fifteen people in the classes. Sometimes we got down to eleven with people moving in and out. Normally it was somewhere in the fifteen range.

Steven Bennett: *Do you know what year you started?*

Kermit Mercer: Yeah, 1937. We started in the fall of 1936. I think about 1939... possibly I was 2nd grade... I'm not sure... One day we picked up our books and we walked across on the planks into the Hartwell building and then around the corner and into the new campus school. It was in the north wing. Dr. Drake was the principal. Dr. Drake, the thing that I remember about him most was that he was in World War One. He had his helmet sitting on the file cabinet. That was very impressive to us young boys, six and seven years old, because the war was coming on.

Everybody knew that war was on its way. That was very impressive. When Armistice Day came, we called it Armistice Day on November 11th, everybody marched out of the school to the front flagpole. All the professors that fought in the war put their helmets on. The flag went up, then down half way, then back up again, and they all saluted. I thought “Ah! [*gasps as if in awe*] That’s very impressive.” Little did I know that I would be in their battlefields, many years later in the military... but that was different.

Steven Bennett: *Were there a lot of professors that had served in the First World War?*

Kermit Mercer: Yeah. Oh, Yeah. Dr. Anselm was in the war. Dr. DeLancey, I forget. I think he was in the war. We could look all these things up. There was quite a few. I can’t think of them right this minute.

Steven Bennett: *That’s okay.*

Kermit Mercer: Anyway, they paraded. They had all their helmets. The men on the street had all their helmets shined up, some of them were in their veterans groups.

But in the campus school we had Ms. Neff. Ms. Neff was a first grade teacher. They warned us “Be very careful, she’s tough.” Ms. Drake was pretty easy going. Ms. Neff was tough. We were all ready and she was tough. She was good. The thing I will say about the Campus School teachers, and this is kind of funny, the teachers in some ways were shanghaied here. If that shocks people it might. Maybe they never thought of it this way. Ora Van Slyke for example, she was the fourth grade teacher. She came here as a drama coach in the college, a drama teacher. Well they all came here for different reasons but when they got here they would say, “Well... we’re not ready yet for that department,” or “We can’t really support... How about you teach in the Campus Training School... *or else!*” So we had these incredible assistant professors that were teachers. They were very inspiring people, very brilliant people. It was fun to rise to their expectations. That’s one of the important things that, even though we were children, somehow they commanded a certain presences and an interest. We were always interested in what they were talking about. These ladies would get together and travel to Europe in the summer. They would bring back glass slides of where they had been. So Europe didn’t seem too far away to us. The world, even though we lived in this little village of Brockport, the world did come right here in the form of these ladies’ travels and their experiences. They were able to tell us about these things first hand. That was great. It made the world seem closer to us.

Well the war changed all of that. There were no more men here during the Second World War. There were only girl students at the college. Of course to our age group that wouldn’t have made that great of a difference. For example I am going to point out Ora Van Slyke. Many years later, after getting an education in different places around the country, I came back here to Brockport to live because my research work was here in Rochester. I came here for crystallography because they had a Geology Department experiment. They said “My gosh, you’ve got all this education! Two more years and you’d have a bachelors degree in geology.” I said “I’m doomed to do that,” and I will tell you why: because Ora Van Slyke was all action. She only stood about four feet at maximum. She was all action. She had a literary voice, a Shakespearean voice. When she spoke the whole class, every head, followed her arms and followed her motion and her voice. If she moved through the room every head just turned and watched Ora Van Slyke. When she told about the universe and how the world was formed and how the rocks were formed; I was

doomed to become a geologist. It was a beautiful thing because many, many, many years later as an old lady in the hospital I heard her voice. I was visiting my wife and I stopped.

“Ms. Van Slyke, I’m Kermit Mercer, do you remember me?”

[She said] “Oh yes, I remember.”

I said, “Bless you. You forced me to become a geologist just from your artistic discussion of how the world was formed.” She thought that was great.

Steven Bennett: *What grade was it that she taught?*

Kermit Mercer: She was fourth grade. In fourth grade we learned how the world formed. It made sense to me because science was really what was in my blood. A lot of us were really serious about science. I don’t know if there is that many these days. Really serious! Chemistry was our love, and electricity and electrons. We just wanted to learn everything and here she built the whole Earth for us right in the fourth grade. She could build the Earth by talking and showing and molding it in the air with her hands. She really was a drama teacher, and it worked. That’s one of the people I thought a great deal of.

Now we really weren’t that good at our math, believe it or not, because the teachers we were getting, they were student teachers, weren’t really that into math and mathematics. We needed the math. We were very good at speaking and social communications. When we got to high school they told us, “You people are all very good at communications, you can write, you can talk, you can do all these things... But your math is a little... You didn’t know you had to work that hard. We had to learn to do that.

The last two years 7th and 8th grade, we had men teachers. Mr. Lane was 7th grade. He had come back from the war. Bernard White was our 8th grade teacher. They settled us down on the math. We really honed in on math. I loved that. I loved every bit of it. They really helped. They were also more physical in their getting a response from us. With the ladies we could be a little bit smart-alec-y and they would tell us not to, but they were not physical. These men, we learned, were physical. When we did something a little bit out of hand they could take ahold of your shirt and lift you right up. They got your attention very easily. It was good. It was very good. There was no monkeying around and getting away and running away. They came after you and you settled down. We respected them, very much so.

Steven Bennett: *Later on you ended up going to college here?*

Kermit Mercer: Many, many, many, many years later. I went to the high school for four years. I had already graduated from Deforest Institute, because all you had to do in those days was pass the examinations for the technical school. When I got out of high school I was working on Mercer Street where my great-grandfather lived. It was Nichols Electric Company. I learned how to dig ditches. My father told me right away, “There’s twenty-six shovels and you are going to have to learn every one of them. We are using a ladder and you are going to have to learn how to do that. So I learned an awful lot about plumbing, heating, electrical, digging ditches... I learned a lot of things that summer.

I got a job at General Motors Delco. They were making special little motors for the B-29 guns. These guns were synchronized by a person sitting up near the front of the airplane controlling the weapons in the back. These tiny motors took a lot of electronics. One of the teachers knew that I had already graduated from Deforest Institute, got my certificates. I hired into their research department.

Then I went into the U.S. Air Force about a year later. The Korean War was still on. The Air Force said, "Oh, we want you to teach radio." After a year in the Air Force they made me a teacher at Scott Airbase. I taught there and then went to Europe for two years. In France I was with Air Force communications for NATO.

Then I came back and got a job instantly with Stromberg-Carlson General Dynamics, servicing test equipment for radar, which was no problem for me. About a year later I went to the basic research laboratory, applied physics laboratory. We designed the Enrico Fermi Reactor instrumentation for the Enrico Fermi Reactor in Monroe, Michigan, right outside of Detroit. It was a nuclear reactor, the only way to go. But I am sure the country will find that out almost too late.

Anyway, after that I went to the basic research lab for ten years for General Dynamics. General Dynamics decided they would move to San Diego, but I really liked it here, had a home here, and so I stayed. I went back to school on the G.I. Bill after taking a leave of absence to do research. I ended up going to school two years here; all it took was two years to get the bachelors degree in geology. I think I might have been one of the very first geologists, there might have been two of us, that graduated from the State College here at Brockport. I don't think they have a *serious* geology department now. It's more environmental science or something.

I went from there to the university. I taught one year. I wrote three courses for New York State teaching. I wrote them all in one year. I would never do that again. We won't get into that. I then joined the University of Rochester and I have been there now for forty years. I am still there at the age of 78.

Steven Bennett: *Are you still teaching?*

Kermit Mercer: Well, its research. Grant supported research. But I teach the graduate students. That was my story.

Painting Ms. Van Slyke: An Afterward

Helen Simpson is a long time resident of the Village of Brockport and is well known for the photo studio she operated for many years in downtown Brockport. She bares a remarkable resemblance to her daughter Kelly who introduced us. Both are fair-haired and vibrant raconteurs with outgoing personalities. My interview with Helen took place significantly later than all of the preceding interviews. We were able to talk briefly on and off in the main ballroom following the opening reception. Our interview was frequently interrupted and the transcript is different in style and the most heavily edited as a result. Helen's story focuses on the now familiar Ora Van Slyke. I considered this interview with its unique account of the enduring bond between teacher and pupil to be the perfect afterward to this history of the Brockport Campus School.



Helen Simpson with her portrait of Ora Van Slyke. The portrait currently hangs on the walls of the Alumni House on the campus of The College at Brockport.

Helen Simpson: Where do you want me to start?

Steven Bennett: *You were talking about your teacher Ms. Van Slyke, who seems to be a very popular teacher.*

Helen Simpson: Ora Van Slyke. She was marvelous. She was my fourth grade teacher. I believe they said she was an American Indian. Anything she did, she held the floor. You're interested. When she talked you listened. It was so evident that what she was saying was important, that you understand her. I never write a note to anyone or send a card that I don't think of her because she was into the Palmer Method of writing.

She would stand at the front of the classroom at the blackboard and she would do the 'O's over and over and over again in circles. 'P's over and over and over... I never write a note or a birthday card or any kind of a card that I don't think of Ora Van Slyke and her Palmer Method of writing. Another thing she was into dramatics, theater. She directed many plays. When I was in

fourth grade we did *Mid-Summer's Night Dream*, which was Shakespeare. I was Light. I had this Grecian dress. It was like gauze. I was very blond as a child. We did that play. Now think, now that I am this age, thinking of a fourth grader in a Shakespearian play... but that was Ora! She would say, "Now, when you speak your voice has got to bounce off that back wall. I want you to open your mouth." She would be so expressive with what she talked about.

So anyway the studio was opened in downtown Brockport in 1959. I was there until I retired, which was in 2007. After we had been open we did many of the college seniors and high school senior graduation portraits. Some times you have a contract for a yearbook and you have to do this. I didn't want the contracts; it was too much work. I would do the senior portraits separately and then furnish them with the glossy and so on. Going back to my 4th grade where I started and Ora Van Slyke. It was always in my heart and in my mind that I wanted to photograph her. Probably in the late 60s or early 70s, I may be wrong on the date, I had seen her on the street. She would come in and visit. Downtown Brockport would have those little shops. They were a little different from what they are now, but there were many of them. She would come in and chat. "How are things going?" and da da da, had I heard from this one and had I heard from that one? Always very remembering of her students.

I said, "You know Ora, would you come in and sit for me?"

"Oh! What do you mean?"

"I would love to do a portrait of you."

I took her photograph, made several proofs, and then selected what I would paint. She said that she had too many wrinkles, too many age spots, and no, absolutely no, no, no part of it. Months went on Steve, after that. My mom used to help me in the studio. We had a little intercom system. I would be in the dark room and she would call me at the counter. She would say, "Helen, you have a phone call." This day she said, "Helen, Ora Van Slyke is on the phone." I'm thinking, "Ora Van Slyke?" She decided that if I wanted to do her portrait I had to pick her up right then. She had some fabric that she wanted to use and would I come and get her? Well, I was printing, I didn't want to do it at that moment. But I knew if I didn't do it that the opportunity would be gone.

So I went and got her in my car. I got an antique chair from my mother. I borrowed it. It was a fireside chair. She was very petite, probably 4"5", 4"6"... not much... little. I picked her up and brought her down. She had this gigantic black piece of fabric trimmed with gold threads that she had purchased in India. It was yardage. She had very little shoulders. As you get older sometimes you get smaller. She wanted that fluffed up. So that is what I did. I fluffed that up and put that around her shoulders. That was my portrait. After I finished it she was happy. She wanted the age spots and wrinkles removed. I said, "Well, would you just let me soften them a little bit? You've worked hard for those. I don't want to remove them," because that would have taken her character way.

I gave her a miniature print of that which she was very, very happy about. In turn she asked me if I would be offended if she gave me a couple pieces of her jewelry. So I have a pin, a silver pin, and a bracelet that was hers. Of course I was honored to have that.

Appendix: The Special Olympics

At the end of their interviews I asked a few people about the Special Olympics which were hosted in Brockport in 1979. The Olympics had a major impact on the shape of the College at Brockport including the construction of a new stadium, new sports fields, and the donation of two large statues by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, which have become iconic landmarks of the school. Brockport archivist Mary-Jo Gigliotti encouraged me to collect information on this important event in Brockport history if the opportunity presented itself. I have included these responses in this separate appendix. I hope it will serve as a convenient resource for anyone interested in this topic.

Doris Sweeting *On the Special Olympics*: I wasn't working [at the college] but I volunteered from the community. I was in the cafeteria for part of it and then I was out when they were having the races and things. I helped with that and then of course for the very end. Oh it was wonderful! The closing ceremonies! Seeing those kids, handicapped as they were, just gives you such a great feeling to see them be so happy participating. My husband and I lived on South Avenue at that time and we hosted a mother and sister of one of the participants and we have kept in touch [with them] ever since that time.

Helen Simpson *On the Special Olympics*: There is another story. What I did at the Special Olympics. They asked me if I would cover it photographically. I said sure. I had my little tag on and I went down to the stadium. There were thousands of people here. It was remarkable for Brockport. And the line up, I couldn't believe the line up. Senator Kennedy, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, and Dr. Brown. Eunice Kennedy Shriver was the founder. I took this great shot of Ted [Kennedy] and I sent it to him. I sent two and I said, "Would you be so kind as to [sign this for me]?" [*points to a photograph of Ted Kennedy*] That's the one he autographed and returned to me. That is a pretty neat story too. He was a womanizer, Steve, and he was very arrogant, but he was a good man in his beliefs and he died trying to help the health system. I began to look at him with two eyes, to realize that we all have some good.

That was a great time in Brockport. It was fun. Several of the celebrities were here. They had a downtown merchant window display. It was going to be a competition. I had gone to the bank and Dr. Brown, who was the president then, I came back to the studio and here he is with Suzanna St. James. She was an actress on TV. They were in my studio with my mother talking. I always have a little jar of suckers and lollipops on my counter. She pulled one out and said, "Can I have a lollipop?" I grabbed my camera and got a photo of her and Dr. Brown in the studio. I went up the next day to the Olympics and it was packed with tents and people being interviewed. All kinds of celebrities.